

INFORMATION REPORT INFORMATION REPORT

CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

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25 YEAR RE-REVIEW

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DEFECTOR RECEPTION CENTER

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Introduction

Described below is an [] account of the October 1948 earth-
quake centered in the Ashkhabad area. []

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The Earthquake Shocks

1. The earthquake was first felt during the night of 5 October 1948, and the first strong shock came at 0200 hours. [] slept through this first shock, but at 0700 hours a second and very strong shock [] later heard from a radio broadcast that a reading of 8½ or 9½ had been registered on seismographs. At first [] thought that the building had been hit by an airplane. [] rushed out of the building and noticed that, except for a badly damaged three-story building which was still standing nearby, the entire city seemed to be a leveled mass of rubble.

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2. The populace was rushing about in complete panic. Some were shouting, "The atom, the atom, the war has already begun." The chaos was intensified when someone discovered water seeping up through the sandy soil and spread the rumor that a torrent was rushing down from the mountains and would engulf the city.

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Initial Disaster Relief

3. Some of the inhabitants tried to calm the rest of the panic stricken populace. A large crowd gathered in the city square where some of the city Communist Party leaders were trying to assure the inhabitants that there was no cause for panic. This quieted the mob to an extent. The Party leaders assured the mob that help would soon be forthcoming and that the people should first of all pitch in and help organize immediate disaster relief. The Party leaders then hurriedly organized rescue teams and set up a headquarters of a temporary nature in the square. []

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4. By the end of the first day, many officially inspired slogans were painted throughout the town, on walls, fences, etc., enjoining the people not to believe the rumors of the panicky. In spite of a high degree of hysteria and panic among the people, rescue operations began immediately. Two large areas were designated as collecting points for the injured; one on Karl Marx Square and the other at the city airport. [] that at the airport thousands of injured were laid out on a layer made from cotton bales. To add to the confusion, someone accidentally set the cotton on fire, and many of the injured were burned before a fire truck was found to put out the blaze.

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5. Outside help was quick in arriving at the stricken city. Almost immediately, planes began to land by the hundreds, taking out the injured to hospitals in Baku, Tashkent, Mary (3735-N6200E) and Krasnovodsk (N 4003-E-5310). These air evacuation operations continued for several days.

Surviving troops, garrisoned in the city itself, were organized almost immediately, presumably by the city government (Gorsoviet), to direct rescue operations and to provide security. Within 40 minutes following the earthquake, a group of troops was dispatched to guard the bank and the building which had housed the Gorsoviet. [] the Gorsoviet building was one of the first places to have a guard placed around it because it contained secret documents.

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6. By the time guards had been placed at the bank, two of the bank safes had already been looted. Despite the fact that rescue operations were

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just starting there, some looting had already taken place.

7. That same day unidentified troops from nearby casernes began to arrive to help restore order and aid in the rescue operations. Some of the units had tanks and bulldozers, which began to pull down badly damaged buildings. Other unidentified troops began to collect the dead. Large common graves were bulldozed and also dug by hand in several places on the outskirts of the city. Entire truckloads of dead were dumped into these common graves.

8. Other unidentified troops were assigned to bolster security for the more important government and city buildings. However, there were insufficient troops to guard all buildings against looting during the first few days following the earthquake. The city police force was reorganized primarily to restore order and to prevent looting, while the military were supposed to handle the rescue operations. However, there were insufficient police forces for the job and they had to be assisted by troops.

9. Looting began to snowball even while rescue operations were still going on. Military troops took part openly in the looting, and the police force, which could better hide the loot since its members lived in town, looted still more openly and flagrantly. The troops, on the other hand, had no place to hide their loot. Consequently, they limited themselves to taking mostly food and drink and whatever they could hide.

10. The inhabitants were told that they were not to roam the streets during the hours of darkness, and printed notices to that effect were tacked in conspicuous places. [] heard all kinds of rifle firing during the night. [] assumed that these came from guards who were firing at looters. Col. Petrov (fnu), allegedly the son of General of the Army Petrov² fnu, and the military commandant of the town, was very displeased with the lack of order and even more displeased with the police force, which was doing more looting than guarding. One night he allegedly met two city policemen and caught them in the act of looting. In attempting to apprehend them he was shot and killed.

11. [] headed for the Meat Packing Kombinat, almost immediately after the earthquake. A group of soldiers there were knocking down the parts of the structure still standing with the aid of a tank. In spite of the presence of troops, civilian bystanders were busy looting all the food they could carry. In fact, some of the soldiers were heaping food into the arms of the looters.

12. On the third day following the earthquake, [] set out to loot some cigarettes. [] a 14-year-old boy, was carrying off some soap that he had taken from a damaged drug store when he was halted by a soldier who was guarding a large shop area. [] failed to halt and was shot in the leg. He lay there for some time before he was finally carried off to Karl Marx Square, where the injured were still being collected. He died from loss of blood while at this Square.

13. Despite all efforts of the city police and the military to restore order, final restoration of order was accomplished only about 10 days after the earthquake. Order actually came about with no help from the troops or the city police. The looters were satiated by about the tenth day, and the looting ceased. Altogether, many people were killed while plundering and looting during the 10 days of disorder following the earthquake. Those who were not killed in the act of looting were apprehended and brought to trial. [] these people lucky because they were not shot. The commonly administered punishment was 25 years confinement.

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Other Effects of Earthquake

14. For several days after the earthquake, many barnyard fowl and large numbers of livestock wandered aimlessly around the city. Within a relatively short time, however, these had all been slaughtered and hidden by individuals as a store of food. Wild animals from the city zoo also wandered in the streets until they were killed or driven to the mountains.

15. Many of the inhabitants went out of their minds. [] recalled one incident in particular, concerning the director of the hide factory who had lost his wife, six children, and six other close relatives. [] who had gone to the debris that had formerly been the city library to loot some books, found this man there, surrounded by heaps of books which all pertained to the Marxist-Leninist philosophy. He was leafing through them, muttering to himself, and quoting passages from these books, oblivious of the chaos about him. This man, obviously out of his mind, sat here for several days before someone carted him away.

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16. Although the survivors had been told that they could leave the city if they wished, few actually did. Within two days the entire area had been sealed off. Soldiers were posted all around the city, 20 meters apart from each other, and they did not permit unauthorized persons to enter the city.

17. Survivors obtained drinking water from individual wells until military personnel had decontaminated other sources of water supply which had corpses in them. After order was restored, a food rationing system was set up. The inhabitants cheated on these rations, however. A head of a household would claim a non-existent family member in order to get additional rations. No attempt was made subsequently to recover looted items or falsely-claimed rations.

Organization of Reconstruction

18. As reconstruction started, the Soviet government allegedly granted 10,000,000 rubles for disaster relief. Shortly after order was restored, unidentified military construction battalions and recruited civilian workers began to move into the area. They set up tent communities outside the city. Tents were also made available to the survivors by factory and institutional directors, who were organized by the Gorsovet to administer their employees.

19. The civilian workers, coming from all parts of the USSR, were recruited for a two-year period to work on the reconstruction project. For signing up, these workers received a bonus amounting to their monthly basic wage scale. It was rumored that so many volunteers flocked to the area that it was necessary to curtail work on the Main, Turkmen Canal. [] estimated that at least 200,000 of them, volunteer and recruited, flocked to the city to begin its reconstruction. In addition to these persons, [] estimated that a much larger number of soldiers were also used in the reconstruction work. Convict labor was also used.

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20. In addition to the above persons, the survivors within the city also worked for its reconstruction. The latter were organized into work brigades and were assigned to certain common labor jobs, mainly rubble clearing. They received pay for this. During their spare moments they were permitted to work on the reconstruction of their own living quarters. The first priority in the reconstruction was to reestablish the utilities and then to rebuild state buildings, factories, and institutions. As soon as a factory was rebuilt, the former employees returned to work.

21. Prior to the earthquake, Ashkhabad had had a population of about a half million. However, the city had consisted mostly of one-story buildings, mainly mud huts. Very few buildings were higher than one story, these being factories and state institutions. The tallest building was the Meat Packing

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Kombinat, which had been eight stories high.

22. Concerning the loss of life, [] estimated that about half the population had been killed outright and that many more had died later as a result of their injuries. 25X1

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22. [] Ashkhabad in 1951. The city was completely rebuilt within two years, but the new city differed very little from the old one. About the only difference [] was that the city was a little more spread-out and a little bit squatter. Schools which had formerly been two-stories high were now one story high, and in the entire city only the Soviet building was higher than two stories, it being three stories high. Almost all the buildings were reconstructed on the same foundations. 25X1

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Earthquake Effects on Other Communities

The earthquake had apparently centered in Ashkhabad. [] small villages around it did not suffer. The only other town that had really felt the earthquake was an unknown town in Iran. [] the Soviet government sent truck after truck of supplies to aid this town. 25X1

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